

Homelessness – Caerphilly County Borough Council

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Summary report

Summary

What we reviewed and why

- 1 In January 2018, the Auditor General's report on 'How Local Government Manages Demand – Homelessness', identified that 'Local authorities are reacting to the problems caused by homelessness with varying degrees of success, but there is limited focus on preventing the fundamental causes of homelessness.'¹
- 2 The report highlighted that 'Legislation focusses on preventing homelessness but not all authorities have effectively organised themselves to fully implement these new duties' and 'Local authorities and partners need to focus on tackling the underlying causes of homelessness but are not giving this sufficient focus in their strategic responses.'
- 3 One of the recommendations in the report was for local authorities to set out and agree their expectations of partners identifying how they will work together to alleviate homelessness. The agreement should be reviewed regularly, and all partners' performance reviewed to identify areas for improvement.
- 4 Since March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic and more recently the Ukraine Refugee Crisis and cost of living crisis have been putting increased pressure on the Council's homelessness service. It has also resulted in an increase in the number of people presenting as homeless, with the number of unintentionally homeless and in priority need having doubled in the last year from 56 in Q3 2020-21 to 113 in Q4 2021-22.
- 5 This increase has led the Council to source new emergency temporary accommodation. Additional support is required to manage such facilities to avoid rough sleeping. The total number of households in Bed and Breakfast accommodation has also increased by 123% over the last year from 60 in Q3 2020-21 to 134 Q4 2021-22.
- 6 During the latter part of 2021, through to the current day, the Council has been facing several external risks that are negatively impacting the number of households seeking support from the homelessness service. These include:
 - the ending of the UK Government's furlough scheme;
 - the ending of the Universal Credit top-up;
 - escalating utility costs, rising inflation;
 - new/changing legislation such as the Renting Homes Wales Act (2016) and the potential that rough sleeping will become a priority need; and
 - increasing numbers of Ukrainian refugees and other asylum seekers.

¹ Auditor General for Wales, [How Local Government manages demand – Homelessness](#), January 2018.

- 7 These pressures have also negatively impacted the Council's ability to prevent homelessness, with a fall in the percentage of households prevented from becoming homeless from 73.1% in 2019-20 to 62.18% in 2021-22.
- 8 As the Auditor General's 2018 report identified, homelessness 'is more than a housing problem with much of what causes homelessness being outside the control and influence of local authorities' homelessness services. However, despite this, it is the local authority which has the statutory duty to prevent and address homelessness.' Under the Housing Act 2014, the Welsh Government sought to co-operate, to ensure that tackling homelessness is wider than a local authority housing service and a multi-agency response is required to be truly effective.
- 9 Over the last year the Welsh Government has required councils to document their plans for addressing homelessness in their Housing Support Programme Strategy and more recently their Rapid Rehousing Transition Plan. Both plans must reflect the critical role that effective partnership working will have on minimising homelessness.
- 10 Therefore, our review has sought to answer the question: In seeking to address homelessness, is the Council effectively adapting its strategic intent to deliver a long-term sustainable preventative approach? With a key area of focus for the review being to explore how the Council is working with its partners to deliver its homelessness ambitions.
- 11 We undertook the review during the period May 2022 to August 2022. Our work included reviewing documents, interviewing staff, Councillors and partners, and facilitating a workshop with key homelessness partners.

What we found

- 12 We have concluded that tackling homelessness is an important priority for the Council. However, it has yet to fully develop a sustainable and preventative approach to achieve this.
- 13 We reached this conclusion because:
- homelessness is a strategic priority for the Council. It has outlined its ambition within several strategic plans which it has and intends to continue to develop with its key partners.
 - there are many complex and difficult issues facing the homeless in Caerphilly and, while the Council is aware of them, its plans to address these issues are yet to be fully implemented.
 - more needs to be done, building on the way the Council is using integrated preventative work with partners, to address future demand for homelessness.
 - the Council has positive relationships with many of its partners. Some have identified areas that could be improved further to help prevent and reduce homelessness where the Council has yet to take action.
 - the Council is proactive in seeking to increase its resources and is developing its understanding of its future resource requirements.

- the Council has a framework for monitoring and evaluating its progress on its homelessness ambition. However, the effectiveness of this is impeded by the absence of clear milestones and targets.

Exhibit 1: recommendations

The table below sets out the recommendations that we have identified following this review.

Recommendations

To improve the Council's ability to understand its performance and drive improvement, the Council should:

Recommendation 1 – strengthen its planning and monitoring for homelessness by:

- better use of forecasting and benchmarking data;
- setting a clear longer-term vision to meet changing needs;
- developing clear milestones and targets to assess its progress;
- identifying measures to evaluate the impact of its preventative activity; and
- ensuring the required medium to longer-term resources are reflected in its Medium Term Financial Plan.

Recommendation 2 – continue to work with its partners (internal and external) to address some key areas for improvement, such as:

- engaging partners earlier in the development of key plans, strategies and developments;
- identifying opportunities to improve the completeness and timeliness of shared information;
- assessing the opportunities to improve the offender pathway; and
- improving the dialogue with partners around what constitutes a 'reasonable offer of accommodation'.

Detailed report

Tackling homelessness is an important priority for the Council. However, it has yet to fully develop a sustainable and preventative approach to achieve this

Homelessness is a strategic priority for the Council. It has outlined its ambition within several strategic plans which it has and intends to continue to develop with its key partners

In reaching this conclusion we found that:

- 14 Preventing homelessness is a key Council priority in the current Corporate Plan 2018-2023. A Cabinet Member has a specific portfolio for Housing, which includes homelessness. This should ensure that this area continues to have a strategic profile.
- 15 The Council has also made a commitment to building more Council and affordable accommodation by 2025. It has stated that accommodating the needs of homeless individuals will form a part of its development programme.
- 16 To comply with Welsh Government requirements, the Council has several current strategies and plans. For example, the Housing Support Programme Strategy (HSPS), Rapid Re-Housing Transition Plan (RRTP) and the Local Housing Strategy (LHS). These outline the Council's approach and ambitions around homelessness.
- 17 The Council has developed both the LHS and the HSPS in conjunction with partners, albeit the methods of engagement and consultation used particularly for the HSPS were impacted by the pandemic.
- 18 The Council has told us that its RRTP has been developed with one-to-one discussions with stakeholders and partners. Some of the partners engaged with as part of our work confirmed this. However, to ensure that the final plan is shaped and informed by a much broader group of stakeholders, it is proposing to establish a Strategic Partnership Group. This group had not been established at the time of our work. Engaging Partners around the design and delivery of its RRTP will be critical if there is to be an effective multi-disciplinary/sector approach to preventing and reducing homelessness.
- 19 The Council is in the process of drafting several supporting plans, such as its Development and investment strategies to further outline aspects of its strategic intent around homelessness. It will be important to engage partners and stakeholders early in the development of these. Some partners felt that the Council could do more to engage them earlier on specific developments, in particular where there will be support services that will also need to be provided by others.

There are many complex and difficult issues facing the homeless in Caerphilly and, while the Council is aware of them, its plans to address these issues are yet to be fully implemented

In reaching this conclusion we found that:

- 20 The Council has an improved retrospective and current understanding of its homelessness position from its own internal information and the needs analysis undertaken for the recent key documents such as, the Housing Support Programme Strategy (HSPS) and the Rapid Rehousing Transition Plan (RRTP).
- 21 Some of the key factors that are impacting the current homelessness position within the Borough include:
- the increasing complexity and volume of homelessness cases which the Council has reported as negatively impacting staff well-being. The Council is seeking to redress this through its ongoing review of structures and resources for the service.
 - a lack of single bed or move on accommodation stock, which currently are the properties in highest demand for those at risk of homelessness. The Council, together with the private sector, has recently developed affordable single bed accommodation and is currently evaluating sites to build more accommodation.
 - existing accommodation is often unsuitable and does not meet tenants' specific needs. This leads to failed tenancies, exacerbated mental health issues and a negative impact on the Council's preventative ambitions. At the time of our work, the Council told us it was undertaking a review of accommodation suitability to understand this issue more fully. We have not seen the outcome of this review.
 - the increasing numbers of those 'sofa surfing', although due to the difficulty in quantifying this data, it represents an unknown future risk.
 - a recognition that the Common Allocations Policy may not focus appropriately on the people in most need. At the time of our work the Council was reviewing this.
 - the legacy of a significant increase in the use of temporary accommodation due to the mandated requirement to provide emergency accommodation for all rough sleepers during the pandemic.
 - current and future external issues, including: the Ukraine Refugee Crisis, the Cost-of-Living Crisis, new legislation such as the Renting Homes Wales Act (2016) and the potential that rough sleeping will soon become a priority need. These have and will increase demand on the Council's housing/homelessness service on an already limited supply of high demand accommodation. The Council told us that responding to the Cost-of-Living Crisis is now its primary focus and that it has started to realign its services to

be able to respond more effectively. Supporting tenants to maximise their benefits will be increasingly important to help ease the financial pressures during this crisis. The Council has a dedicated benefits maximisation team who in the last year have managed to increase benefits for tenants by more than £3 million.

- 22 The work undertaken by Crisis during 2021 has provided the Council with a more comprehensive and granular understanding of the homelessness environment and its approach to addressing the issues. The Council has reported that it is in the process of responding to the issues raised within the Crisis report, with the identification of some quick wins and longer-term changes which it is integrating into its RRTP.
- 23 However, the Council still needs to develop an understanding of the future homelessness outlook if it is to plan effectively for the longer term.

More needs to be done, building on the way the Council is using integrated preventative work with partners, to address future demand for homelessness

In reaching this conclusion we found that:

- 24 The Welsh Government's Housing Support Grant funding has enabled the Council to develop many initiatives with its internal and external partners. This is to help support its preventative approach to supporting people and reducing homelessness.
- 25 The Council has recognised that due to the national imperative for no one to be on the streets during COVID, it had focused more on dealing with the immediate crisis and less on prevention during this period. Therefore, a greater focus on preventative approaches will be needed if it is to start to address the increases in those at risk of or presenting as homeless.
- 26 The Council has made a strategic commitment to focus on prevention. This is clear within its RRTP which states it wishes 'To focus on early prevention and intervention of Homelessness which will support people to remain in their homes. Where this is not possible to work with households to achieve a positive successful outcome before they must enter interim temporary accommodation.'
- 27 The Council has also stated that it intends to ensure there is a greater focus on identifying and meeting the specific needs of its citizens and that this will be key to its preventative approach. In support of this it has committed within its RRTP to consider establishing a multi-disciplinary central assessment co-located hub. This will provide more person-centred housing and support need assessments to better understand the needs of those who require assistance and support.
- 28 The Council's new access service 'Caerphilly Cares', developed initially in response to the pandemic, has been successful in supporting individuals and preventing them from becoming homeless. At the time of our work, the Council was

considering the Caerphilly Cares model as part of the referral pathway from the Health Board to expedite the discharge process. However, more work needs to be undertaken to measure the impact of this support and the border prevention interventions, both in terms of avoided costs, improved well-being, and reductions in homelessness.

- 29 The Council's Public Accountability Measure (PAM) measure 'percentage of households prevented from becoming homeless' has seen negative performance, dropping from 73.1% in 2019-20 to 62.18% in 2021-22. The Council's own assessment of the reasons for this reduction is due to the impact of COVID on key services to support homelessness. Whilst PAMs were not collected across Wales during 2020 and 2021, it will be important that this picture is set in the context of other Councils.
- 30 There are many regional groups that directly or indirectly impact the Council's planning and approach to tackling homelessness such as; Cardiff Capital Regions, Gwent Housing Support Commissioning Group, the Gwent Public Service Board, and the Regional Partnerships Boards' Sub-group, Housing Health and Social Care. However, other than for the Gwent Regional Housing Support Collaboration Group, the extent to which there is a current specific regional focus and collaboration around addressing Homelessness appears to have less of a profile than it did in prior years. It is recognised that the pandemic, and the requirement to have a local focus in plans such as the RRTP, will have contributed to this.

The Council has positive relationships with many of its partners. Some have identified areas that could be improved further to help prevent and reduce homelessness where the Council has yet to take action

In reaching this conclusion we found that:

- 31 Key internal partnerships within the Council to deliver on its homelessness ambitions, such as those between the Housing Support Work funded through the Housing Support Grant and the Homelessness part of the Housing Service, are well integrated. This is despite them being in two different services areas, albeit under the same directorship.
- 32 Overall, the partners that we were able to engage with as part of our work were very positive about their relationship with the Council. Partners provided several examples of shared homelessness projects and reflected on their ability to engage with Council officers on a day-to-day basis. However, not all partners were available for interview or were represented at our Partner workshop.

- 33 Our work identified several examples of positive working with Partners around homelessness. These included:
- the recently completed collaborative new build project with the private sector (Willmott Dixon) to build energy-efficient affordable one-bed apartments for the future.
 - working with private landlords through the Caerphilly Keys programme, to provide support for landlords and tenants to sustain tenancies in the private rented market.
 - initiatives funded under the Housing Support Grant including the joint Health and Council funded roles. For example, the Nurse Practitioner based in a GP surgery specifically focused on supporting homeless people. Also, a team located at a provider of specialist care acts as a bridge between, Health, Housing, Social Services, Mental Health, and Drug and Alcohol services to support those with complex needs from becoming homeless.
 - psychology staff based in a homelessness unit, where they have provided a virtual service to understand the root cause behind why a person is homeless. Partners have used this information to identify and support specific needs to reduce the chances of these individuals becoming homeless again.
 - the proactive relationship between the Health Board's Mental Health and Learning disabilities team (MH&LD) and the Council's Housing support and Homelessness teams. A good example of this is in the joint development of a new discharge process of patients from the MH&LD wards. It focused on improving the timeliness of assessments and reducing the risk of homelessness, which we were told is showing some early benefits.
 - the development of a debt relief order process in conjunction with the Citizens Advice Bureau and the homelessness team, which will support tenants who are struggling to pay their rent and are under threat of becoming homeless.
- 34 When prompted to focus on opportunities for improvement, key reflections from partners included:
- some commissioned services feeling that their voice is not always heard or listened to.
 - opportunities for the Council to establish earlier engagement. For example, earlier involvement in proposed developments, in particular, where there will be a requirement for future shared support services.
 - a request that the Council should endeavour to better understand service user need before making their 'reasonable offer' of accommodation to service users.
 - a recognition that managing long-term versus short-term need is challenging. The current situation has forced all partners to be more reactive than proactive, however, they must now focus more on proactive work.

- a need to improve information flows in some areas. For example, Partners felt that aspects of the current allocations system do not work as well as they should, citing concerns over insufficient tenant information being shared with partners. In some cases, this has led to tenants being inappropriately placed and/or the individuals not having the right support around them, leading to their needs becoming more complex and tenancies becoming unsustainable.
- concerns over the effectiveness of the current offender pathway and the need for this to be reviewed. It will be important that the Council's response to this concern in the RRTP which stated, 'Reviewing the existing pathway for offenders with criminal justice agencies is still reflective and current. Considering the employment of a dedicated offender officer within the Housing Solution Team to enhance the joint working between the agencies', is prioritised.

35 Notwithstanding the many positive examples of partners working, there were also some further areas where our work identified opportunities for improvement around internal and external partnerships. These included:

- variable attendance at the local Housing Support Commissioning Group by key partners, such as Probation Services, Police and Health;
- limitations in the relationship with the rest of the Health Board, other than for the Mental Health and Learning Service;
- the need to engage Members earlier in the process for potential developments of accommodation focused on addressing homelessness; and
- information on the homelessness pathways and support is not as clear as it could be for both external and internal customers and therefore represents a risk around potential delays in vulnerable citizens accessing the right support services.

The Council is proactive in seeking to increase its resources and is developing its understanding of its future resource requirements

In reaching this conclusion we found that:

36 The Council have been successful in drawing down additional funding from various Welsh Government grants to support some of their homelessness initiatives. At the time of our review, they were in the process of seeking additional funding from the Welsh Government for a specific capital grant to help with the Ukraine refugee crisis, and with bids for the Regional Partnership Board Regional Improvements Fund which have a homelessness focus. Other successful funding bids include the £3.1 million from the Welsh Government's Innovative Housing Programme to support its partnership project with Willmott Dixon to build 18 new single bed units in the borough.

- 37 Due to the Pandemic, the cost to the Council of temporary Bed and Breakfast accommodation is at all-time high. Whilst the Welsh Government's Hardship Fund has met this cost in part, this funding ceased in March 2022 and only a smaller grant has been made available. Therefore, maintaining the escalating cost of providing temporary bed and breakfast accommodation represents an increased and ongoing financial pressure on the Council's resources.
- 38 The Council's Medium Term Financial Plan includes a proposal that its COVID-19 Earmarked Reserves are topped up to £5 million. This is to cover the additional pandemic-related costs due to be incurred over the short to medium term, including those costs around homelessness.
- 39 There is Member support for the Council's strategic ambition around homelessness, such as developing more single bed accommodation, but costs have yet to be fully defined and are still to be approved by Members. Notwithstanding this, approval was given by the previous administration to set aside £30.2 million to boost the Capital Programme for the Council's Well-being and Place Shaping Framework, which includes the development of affordable accommodation. However, the full long-term picture on the future resources required to deliver the Council's approach to addressing homelessness will become clearer as key strategic documents, such as its Development/Investment Strategy and its understanding of future need and expected outcomes, are finalised.
- 40 The Council has indicated that the new Corporate Plan, will include a focus on homelessness. It will be important that any proposals for homelessness contained within the new Corporate Plan and other homelessness plans and strategies are fully reflected with its revised MTFP to ensure appropriate resourcing matches the Council's ambition.
- 41 Key senior officers within the Housing team are relatively new in post and are currently taking stock on the structures and service design of the Caerphilly Homes (Housing Directorate), to support the delivery of their Local Housing Strategy, Rapid Rehousing Transition Plan and Delivery Plans. Whilst still in progress, it is likely that this stocktake will result in a request for additional resources. This will require approval of a business case which will be prioritised against other competing Council resources.

The Council has a framework for monitoring and evaluating its progress on its homelessness ambition. However, the effectiveness of this is impeded by the absence of clear milestones and targets

In reaching this conclusion we found that:

- 42 The Council has a framework for monitoring and evaluating its progress on its homelessness ambition. Whilst the current suite of Strategies and Plans has a short and medium-term focus, many of the initiatives are focused on addressing need over the longer term.

- 43 Homelessness is one of the key priorities for the Caerphilly Homes Directorate and is routinely monitored as part of the Council's Performance Assessment Framework. However, this assessment framework does not include medium to longer-term milestones and metrics, which means the Council is unable to clearly assess the progress it is making on addressing its homelessness ambitions.
- 44 The Council has recently taken their Rapid Rehousing Transition plan to Cabinet (7 September 2022). It confirmed that this will replace the Homeless Project Plan that was presented to Cabinet in November 2021, which outlined key service area priorities and objectives for the Housing Solution Team. It has also told us that it intends to develop its final Rapid Re-housing Transition Plan into a more local plan which will become its overarching plan for homelessness, and that this will include specific milestones and outcomes to enable it to measure its progress.
- 45 There are some examples of where benchmarking data has been used, such as the development of the Local Housing Strategy. However, this data was from 2018-19. There were few other examples of Homelessness benchmarked data being routinely used to better understand opportunities for service improvement. Whilst the national collection of Public Accountability Measures, including those around homelessness was suspended due to COVID, other required data reporting under the Housing Act (Wales), is available across Wales. The Council could better use this as it develops its approach to preventing and addressing homelessness.
- 46 Members are sighted on progress on specific initiatives/services, such as Caerphilly Cares, with the latest annual performance being scrutinised by the Social Service Scrutiny Committee in March 2022.
- 47 The Housing Directorate is investing in a new Housing IT solution which it is hoped will provide more granular data around Housing and homelessness to support its decision making. The Directorate has also recently created a new post to specifically look at improving housing data, focusing on its fitness for purpose and any potential data gaps to help support better understanding of performance.



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